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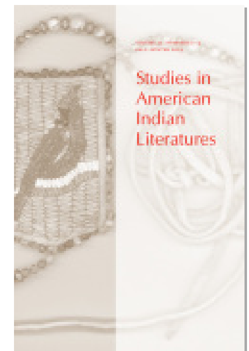

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Indigenous Radical Resurgence and Multispecies Landscapes

Leslie Marmon Silko's *The Turquoise Ledge*

NATHANIEL OTJEN

Desert landscapes have played an extraordinary role in the project of settler colonialism in the United States. As Traci Brynne Voyles argues in *Wastelanding: Legacies of Uranium Mining in Navajo Country*, deserts are sites where settler colonialism has superseded its logical extremes. If this colonial violence aims to destroy and replace Indigenous peoples and environments with colonial modes of inhabitance by stealing land, settler colonialism has gone a step further in the deserts of the US Southwest by rendering these landscapes barren "wastelands." Voyles calls the socioecological project of converting lively and productive Indigenous lands into undesirable and dead places "wastelanding." Viewed as desolate, lifeless, and worthless places, desert wastelands extend the settler-colonial project by obscuring present Indigenous inhabitance, justifying state-sanctioned extractivist practices, and naturalizing the presence of the settler state. Voyles explains that the desert has become the sine qua non of US settler colonialism: "[T]he settler state has grounded itself in the desert Southwest, making the desert central to how we understand our history and ourselves" (18). Dian Million (Tanana Athabascan) observes that Indigenous places, in particular, are conceptualized by the settler state as barren, deserted regions: "Indigenous places are often imagined as isolated empty places, disposable, or usable places subordinate to national need. Indigenous peoples are not isolated, in a past, outside of capital, or without capitalist relations: we are central to them" (25).[1] Acknowledging their centrality to the capitalist settler-colonial project and directly opposing the colonial denigration of the Southwest, Indigenous desert dwellers have long resisted their erasure. Leslie Marmon Silko, in particular, has used literature to defy, critique, and dismantle historical and ongoing forms of settler colonialism, espe-

cially in *Storyteller*, *Ceremony*, and *Almanac of the Dead*. By exposing the structures and operations of colonization, globalization, militarization, and technology throughout her oeuvre, Silko replaces dominant claims to power with Indigenous, decolonial claims to place.

Silko, a Laguna Pueblo woman from New Mexico and Arizona, has recently used the memoir genre to resist the settler-colonial practices of wastelanding, possession, and resource extraction. Participating in the rich and expansive literary traditions of the Native memoir, Silko rejects the historical convention that sees human individuals as bounded subjects singularly shaped by their own determination and instead describes, in the words of Deanna Reder (Cree-Métis), "a communal, collective sense of self" ("Writing" 156). However, rather than restrict the possibilities of a collective self to a homogeneous community of human peers, Silko depicts herself as just one inhabitant among many *more-than-human* beings and things that cocreate and belong within the Sonoran Desert.[2] In *The Turquoise Ledge* (2010) she opposes the settler-colonial view of her desert home outside of Tucson, Arizona, as a vacant wasteland and instead writes herself into a multispecies landscape that teems with rattlesnakes, pack rats, skunks, mice, pigeons, dogs, macaws, and even lively turquoise. Moreover, Silko describes how these more-than-human creatures are threatened by the settler-colonial logics of possession and displacement, which continue to harm beings indigenous to this place.[3] If Native memoirs stress "the sense of a relational self connected to a specific landscape" (Beard, "Teaching" 113), Silko explicates this connection to place by demonstrating how ongoing forms of possession and displacement threaten both her existence as a Native woman and the well-being of local creatures. Contributing to the history of Indigenous life writing that uses personal narratives to resist the violence of colonization, Silko's *The Turquoise Ledge* anticipates a form of what Leanne Betasamosake Simpson (Michi Saagiig Nishnaabeg) terms "radical resurgence" in order to disrupt the physical and ideological tools of settler colonialism that attempt to claim, control, and eventually eradicate certain human and more-than-human bodies.[4] Radical resurgence "refuses dispossession of both Indigenous bodies and land as the focal point of resurgent thinking and action" (Simpson 34). To persist as Indigenous in the settler state is to refuse colonial logics. Or, as Simpson puts it, "I simply cannot see how Indigenous peoples can continue to exist as *Indigenous* if we are willing to replicate the logics of

colonialism, because to do so is to actively engage in self-dispossession from the relationships that make us Indigenous in the first place" (35). Radical resurgence, therefore, "begins from a place of refusal of colonialism and its current settler colonial structural manifestation" (34) and subsequently builds "a politics of refusal that is generative" (177). This essay demonstrates that by supporting more-than-human well-being, Silko refuses settler-colonial possession and displacement and creates a flourishing multispecies landscape. Caught in a web of precarious but enduring entanglements, Silko and these beings craft alternative modes of togetherness to resist contemporary settler-colonial violence.

While *The Turquoise Ledge* resists colonization by promoting multispecies well-being, a danger exists in this interpretation. As Reder observes, "[A] sole focus on narratives of resistance replicates the founding ideas in much criticism about Native American literature that Indigenous texts only exist because of the existence of the colonizer" ("Indigenous" 171). Rather than reproduce this self-effacing, reactionary position, Reder reads Native life writing as seeking to "preserve Indigenous knowledge and specific tribal understandings for their descendants and subsequent generations" (170).[5] As she succinctly explains, "[T]here is more to the politics of self-determination than resistance to oppression" (172). This essay moves away from the often reductive and universalizing interpretation of Native texts as documents of resistance by shifting attention to how radical resurgence is enacted through multispecies collaborations against specific mechanisms of settler colonialism.

To help uncover and explicate "the politics of self-determination" promoted through multispecies resistance, this article reads *The Turquoise Ledge* as engaging the practices of Indigenous environmental studies and sciences (IESS). As Kyle Whyte (Potawatomi) defines it, IESS "centers Indigenous historical heritages, living intellectual traditions, research approaches, education practices, and political advocacy to investigate how humans can live respectfully within dynamic ecosystems" ("Critical" 138). Native IESS scholars study "how moral relationships—including responsibility, spirituality, and justice—within a society yield empirical and humanistic insights about resilience" (139). As the following discussion demonstrates, Silko's memoir participates in this emerging field. Reading *The Turquoise Ledge* through an IESS framework centers Indigenous practices and

elucidates how radical resurgence emerges from practices of care for other beings.[6] With the field's attention to moral relationships and socioecological embeddedness, IESS examines the more than human as a site of colonial possession *and* Native resistance. Whyte and Kari Norgaard, for example, demonstrate how colonialism has harmed, and continues to harm, the abundance and availability of wild rice, sturgeon, salmon, and acorns in the Great Lakes and Pacific Coast regions. The loss of these environmental agents has, in turn, harmed Native gender identities, familial relationships, and ceremonial practices.[7] They also make it clear, however, that Native tribes such as the Anishinaabe and Karuk continue to support these beings, and their indigeneity, in acts that demonstrate "collective continuance," or "a group's capacity to adapt to external forces, from naturally occurring environmental change . . . to more obviously human-induced changes at several scales" (Whyte, "Indigenous Experience" 166). The creatures that inhabit the pages of *The Turquoise Ledge* are a contested site where colonial possessive logics and Indigenous resistance practices meet. Insights from IESS help examine how representations of the more than human in Silko's memoir operate as an act of Native radical resurgence. While Silko's experiences as a Laguna Pueblo woman are unique and must not be used to extrapolate a universal theory of Indigenous resistance, her narrative does reveal that Native care for more than humans, as represented in the memoir genre, can defy settler-colonial logics of possession and displacement.

RATTLESNAKES AND RADICAL RESURGENCE

Rattlesnakes occupy a particularly dramatic site where settler-colonial violence and radical resurgence meet. Long appreciated, respected, and loved by many Indigenous peoples, rattlesnakes are creatures that must be admired and even revered (Portillo 80). With the arrival of European colonialism in the Americas, however, settler colonialists viewed these snakes as impediments to the project of land theft and the naturalization of settler presence. They actively eradicated rattlesnakes, casting them as dangerous menaces that must be removed from all landscapes. Like other settler-colonial policies of land management, the move to eradicate these creatures simultaneously worked to destroy Native connections to place (Silko 110). As Winona LaDuke (Ojibwe) argues in *All*

Our Relations: Native Struggles for Land and Life, the elimination of the more than human is “an immense loss to Native families and cultures” (2). Moreover, Whyte points out that in addition to harming places and Indigenous lifeways, settler colonialism has also obstructed practices of resilience: “[S]ettler campaigns *both* dramatically changed ecosystems . . . *and* obstructed indigenous peoples’ capacities to adapt to the changes” (“Our” 208). For some tribes, the loss of rattlesnakes also precipitated the loss of spiritual and experiential practices associated with these creatures. Yet by seeking to preserve these beings, Native peoples have long resisted cultural and ecological erasure. Silko frames two acts of historical and contemporary rattlesnake eradication—the use of fences and nets to demarcate boundaries and the belief in the home as a bounded, singularly human space—as forms of continued settler-colonial possession and displacement. By practicing moral relationships that seek to maintain the well-being of these snakes, such as freeing them from wires and supporting comfortable living spaces in and around the shared house, Silko partners with these creatures to resist settler-colonial harm and generate a multispecies future.[8] As *The Turquoise Ledge* demonstrates, examining the more than human is central to the project of understanding and dismantling settler colonialism.

Throughout her memoir, Silko describes the landscapes of Tucson as deeply contested places where Indigenous and colonial presence have long collided. These lands have been occupied by Tohono O’odham peoples for millennia, and Silko emphasizes that Native presence defines this place. During one of her many walks through the local Tucson Mountains, Silko discovers a collection of grinding stones along a path and remarks: “The footpaths through the Tucson Mountains are ancient. Humans have lived in these hills and arroyos for thousands of years. . . . For the ancient people, these hills and arroyos held everything they might need for survival” (11). Later in the book she discovers awl tools, petroglyphs, arrow points, and a white quartz knife left by “the ancestors” of the mountains (259). As these examples illustrate, Native peoples *are* this place. Paula Gunn Allen, also a Laguna Pueblo author, makes the Indigenous relationship with place explicit: “We are the land. . . . [T]hat is the fundamental idea embedded in Native American life and culture in the Southwest” (1). Elaborating upon this point, Million explains, “Indigenous place is infinitely more than geographical location. It is in every sense holistic, where all entities are bound in

relations that interactively form societies, human and nonhuman" (29).[9] Not distinguishable or separate from the other entities that create the landscapes in which one exists, Native individuals are one among many multispecies inhabitants at home in the Sonoran Desert. Silko makes this connection between Indigenous bodies and place even more explicit, recognizing the spirits of recently deceased friends in the birds that visit her, including a burrowing owl, a grackle, and a cactus wren (14–15). And while ruminating about her identity, she remarks: "When I think of the Pueblo people, I think of sandstone" (17). People and place, in other words, are coconstitutive.

Silko's Laguna Pueblo understanding of place differs substantially from the settler-colonial view, which separates people from place, views land and its occupants as possessions, and establishes an environmental hierarchy that reinforces notions of human superiority. "In the settler mind," Robin Wall Kimmerer (Potawatomi) observes, "land was property, real estate, capital, or natural resources. But to our people, it was everything: identity, the connection to our ancestors, the home of our nonhuman kinfolk, our pharmacy, our library, the source of all that sustained us. . . . It belonged to itself; it was a gift, not a commodity, so it could never be bought or sold" (17). Deploying a capitalist, possessive view of land, settler colonialists have damaged Silko's multispecies home and her Native practices. Silko describes how Spaniards, during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, brutally mutilated, raped, killed, and enslaved Pueblo, Laguna, Acoma, Apache, and Diné peoples in order to control lands, more-than-human creatures, and Native individuals (20–21). Later came militaries from Mexico and the United States, anthropologists from famous institutions, and boarding schools, which all sought to destroy Indigenous life and possess the newly "deserted" landscape (26–27). Lacking access to nearby public schools as a child, Silko was forced to attend a local boarding school, where she was violently discouraged from speaking the Laguna language. "We children were warned: once we crossed . . . onto the school grounds talking Indian was forbidden. If we disobeyed we'd be sent to the principal's office for punishment. That was the first thing the teachers taught us children on the first day of kindergarten" (40–41). Dispossessed from her language in a government institution, Silko quickly learned that the settler state sought to silence her Native voice. Her childhood home in the Rio San Jose Valley was also subjected to radioactive fallout from

nearby nuclear bomb test sites, radioactive tailings from local uranium mines, and exposed yellowcake uranium from mining operations (69–71). In addition to these offenses, Silko has experienced the colonization of time itself, explaining that "[l]ong before there was any such thing as daylight savings time, the people of the desert Southwest got out of bed long before dawn . . . to work in their cornfields until daylight. . . . The Englishmen saw this and accused the people of laziness; but to work in the heat at high noon as the old gringos did was madness" (89). Even artistic expression in postsecondary institutions has been colonized: "I originally wanted to be a visual artist, not a writer. But at the University of New Mexico I discovered the fine arts college was blind to all but European art with its fetish for 'realism' and 'perspective'" (129). Only recently has Silko begun to practice Laguna art forms. Colonialism, and often settler colonialism more specifically, has disrupted Indigenous places and practices in the Southwest. However, the continued presence of Native and more-than-human vitality in this region signals that the settler-colonial project of dispossession and replacement is incomplete. By coexisting alongside and supporting the continuance of rattlesnakes, in particular, Silko demonstrates that these creatures are a site where Indigenous radical resurgence and settler-colonial violence meet.

FENCES AND NETS

A tool of settler-colonial land possession in *The Turquoise Ledge*, fences displace rattlesnakes by limiting their territories and entrapping their bodies. Resisting this violence, both the snakes and Silko refute physical barriers that divide the landscape. Reviel Netz, in *Barbed Wire: An Ecology of Modernity*, demonstrates that fencing, particularly barbed wire, is a colonial technology that enabled possession of lands in the US West at unprecedented speed and geographic scale. This settler technology continues to crisscross the desert landscape where Silko lives. She had previously placed some wire fencing at strategic points around her home to protect chickens and pigeons from predators but ceased using it when she realized that it traps and kills rattlesnakes. At one point some chicken wire she had discarded "became the death snare for a fine three foot long rattler on the west slope of the hill below my house. The snake was able to get its head and neck through the oval opening but when the fatter part of it could not fit and the snake attempted to go back out, the

wire snagged its scales so it was trapped and died terribly" (84). After this horrific incident, Silko "got rid of all the chicken wire" and installed hardware cloth, which is "superior in every way to chicken wire and does far less harm to reptiles" (84). The act of removing the wire fences promotes the well-being of local snakes.

Like fences, plastic nets are a settler-colonial technology that harm rattlesnakes and threaten Native lifeways. As a tool designed to aid the spread of European American fruit tree agriculture into warm southwestern climates, nylon netting supports the large-scale purchasing of land for orchards and, subsequently, the takeover of aqueducts and waterways to irrigate industrial fields. Plastic nets and massive irrigation systems make industrial agriculture possible in a region with its own unique desert ecology. Orchards replace native species with non-native monocultures, damaging and disrupting the long-term ecological relations that evolved in this arid region. Agriculture has long been used as a mechanism of and justification for land theft from Native tribes. Tree netting harms more than humans, especially birds that seek sustenance and creatures such as rattlesnakes that get caught in its filaments. Silko discovers this when she removes some "wretched" nylon netting designed to keep birds out of fruit trees (84) and later finds a rattlesnake caught in the net's filaments. "It was bad. As the snake struggled to free itself, it had only pulled the netting tighter, until the filaments drew blood on the tender skin between the scales. I had to act fast. I ran indoors and found a pair of tin shears. . . . I was going to have to put both hands within easy striking range of the head and upper body that was not entangled and moved freely" (85). Ensnared with the rattlesnake in this moment, Silko must either try to free the creature or let it suffer a slow death. Moved by the rattler's pain, Silko attempts to cut it free:

> I didn't want to cut or harm the snake in any way. I slowly moved the tin shears down to the ensnared scales; I was so intently focused on freeing the snake from the netting the snake must have somehow understood. . . . Then a strange confidence came over me which I still can't explain. . . . [W]ith the tin shears in my right hand I pushed the steel tips firmly against the snake's body to try to reach the nylon threads cutting into his skin. I managed to get a nylon thread in the shears and snip! The snake didn't react. I exhaled. Again I gently but firmly put the blades of the shears

> under another nylon thread and cut it. When he felt his fat mid-section cut free, the big diamondback glided away gracefully and I felt blessed. (86)

During this precarious moment when both the rattlesnake's and Silko's lives are endangered, they trust one another and ultimately resist the trappings of settler-colonial technology. Mortified by the suffering she has accidentally caused the snake, Silko decides to risk her life for its well-being. As Whyte observes, "For many indigenous peoples, plants, animals and other nonhuman beings, entities and places are understood as among those capable of experiencing harm" ("Indigenous Experience" 166). Trapped in the netting, the rattler experiences the localized harm of the plastic filaments cutting its flesh and the dissipated harm of settler-colonial practices. Kimmerer acknowledges the willingness of Native individuals to aid more than humans as a necessary condition of caring for others: "[Y]ou hear people say that the best thing people can do for nature is to stay away from it and let it be. . . . But we were also given the responsibility to care for land. What people forget is that that means participating—that the natural world relies on us to do good things. You don't show your love and care by putting what you love behind a fence. You have to be involved" (363). Together, Silko and the rattlesnake practice care for one another while simultaneously resisting the technology that threatens their very existence. By destroying the net and freeing one of the animal prisoners it is designed to trap, Silko and the rattlesnake defy settler-colonial projects of possession and displacement.

THE HOUSE

If fences and nets stage a particularly visible encounter between settler and Indigenous practices, the home provides a less apparent and more intimate site of radical resurgence. The home, Stacy Alaimo observes, "has served as the defining container for the Western 'human,' a bounded space, wrought by delusions of safety, fed by consumerism, and fueled by nationalist fantasies" (17–18). Much like the technologies of fences and nets, the home demarcates interior from exterior, what is owned from what is not, what is safe from what is dangerous, and domesticated from wild. While scholars critiquing colonialism have studied the

home and homemaking as settler goals and evidence of displacement, they have left unexamined the ways in which this physical structure and the ideologies that dictate its use support and enable the settler-colonial project.[10] Indeed, the settler home has been integral to imagining the westward progression of the frontier, the fulfillment of Manifest Destiny, and the expansion of the United States. It has served as a site where patriarchal domination could be developed and then practiced to control broader territories and peoples. Settler society extended the ideology of control used to dominate women and children in the home to conquer new subjects and landscapes. The goal of settler colonialism and settler home life are, after all, quite similar: the consolidation of power through violent means in order to erase the claims of others. The home has also harmed more than humans, which is a central practice of settler colonialism. "Nonhuman creatures, ecosystems, and environments have, no doubt, been harmed by the unrelenting encroachment of human domestic space," Alaimo argues, "which is purified, as such, by the elimination of all but a few nonhuman species deemed desirable" (19). Finally, the home is a site that has enabled settler colonialists to imagine themselves as indigenous to place. With "roots" that extend several generations in the same home, settler colonialists are able to justify their continued presence on and claims to land. Threatening actions—whether historically by displaced Indigenous individuals seeking justice or in the present moment by socioenvironmental disasters—are seen as a personal affront to intergenerational settler presence and histories of placemaking supported by the state. As David Naguib Pellow observes, features of the built environment are often used as "subjects and instruments of oppression" (79). The settler home has been used to oppress Native individuals and more than humans.

Silko recognizes the home as a settler-colonial site and resists this violent characterization by dismantling illusions of the house as a bounded, exclusively human space and choosing instead to live with and support the well-being of rattlesnake companions. Her desert home lacks imagined and physical boundaries; instead, the house, the yard, the garage, the storage shed, the pigeon coop, and the garden are all permeable components of the landscape. In fact, Silko does not distinguish herself as separate from the other creatures that create and occupy this place but instead writes herself into the multispecies desert community. She remarks, for example: "In 1997 I started writing little notes about the

sky, the clouds, and all us desert creatures anxious to have the rain. . . . Clouds please take pity on us" (87). Just one of many "desert creatures" who require water for their daily survival, Silko recognizes herself as a vulnerable member of this shared place. Reflecting this understanding of the self as intimately and always connected with more-than-human creatures, Silko's home is a permeable part of the landscape that welcomes and nurtures—rather than excludes and harms—other beings. There are, for instance, holes in the wall behind the kitchen stove that allow animals to enter and exit. As Silko explains, "[A] small spotted Sonora skunk used to come out into the kitchen from under the stove in the winter," and "a big red rattlesnake" once entered the house from this permeable place (91). While skunks, dogs, pigeons, macaws, and pack rats all inhabit the home, rattlesnakes are the favored cohabitants. Despite posing an occasional risk to the dogs, who quickly learn to leave them alone, dozens of rattlers share spaces with Silko. They curl up next to ceramic water bowls and drainpipes in the yard waiting for prey (82); the snakes live by the horse corral (82–83); a female rattlesnake lives under the back step (91); another female rattler birthed six young in the living room; Silko raised one of the juveniles to adulthood and offers her living room as a home for it (92–93); a "big albino rattler" lives near a fig tree and hunts rats that live in a nearby drainpipe; a diamondback occasionally visits the pigeon cage looking for sparrows and small rodents to consume (96); one snake lives under the feed shed (97); a rare banded rock rattlesnake once spent part of an evening in the living room (98); rattlesnakes occasionally enter the cistern (99–100); a "big white rattler" lives in the backyard (102); and three rattlesnakes keep warm under the house beside the fireplace during the winter (103). Silko so appreciates their presence that she has a "snake pipe" installed under the house to "allow the snakes to get in and out" (101). She also fills bowls of water for the snakes and removes potential hazards to their health. By welcoming the rattlers, helping them find suitable homes, disrupting barriers with pipes and holes, and supporting their health, Silko ensures the well-being of these creatures and provides a way to live with them that opposes the bounded, anthropocentric, domineering, and hostile colonial home.

While from a settler-colonial perspective this multispecies community is downright dangerous and represents a failure of the property owner to maintain their space, Silko contends that living with

rattlesnakes can be perfectly safe, and she advances a theory of trust to explain her Native relationship with these beings. Her neighbors drop off "relocated" rattlers in the arroyo below her house because "they've heard" that she is "a friend of snakes" (Silko 290). To support the relocated snakes, Silko "keep[s] the area around the old corrals hospitable with a water trough and places for snakes to hide and to find rodents" (290–91). By supporting the well-being of these creatures, Silko challenges the colonial view that rattlesnakes do not belong in the Sonoran Desert. Shortly after moving to this area, she met a large rattlesnake four feet long and five inches in diameter that she jokingly called "Baby." This rattler, as she puts it, "made me feel welcome here. He knew I was a friend of snakes" (82–83). Given the gift of welcoming, Silko begins to establish relationships with other snakes. One time a rattlesnake fell into the cistern, and as Silko worked to free it, the snake understood that she "meant no harm" (100) and cooperated with the rescue effort. The female rattlesnake that lives under the back step "trusts" Silko, and they have established a daily schedule with one another (91). Finally, during a tense encounter with the dogs, the "big white rattler" demonstrates its trust and respect for Silko: "The snake didn't rattle at me, most snakes here don't rattle at me, only at the dogs" (102). Silko, unlike the dogs, is a trusted companion.

In addition to placing one's well-being in the control of another, Silko suggests that mutual trust is developed through the process of establishing familiarity. For example, at one point a rattler under the house "used to rattle whenever I stepped near the refrigerator door" (Silko 91). "At first she didn't recognize my footsteps and used to rattle loudly under the kitchen floor where I stood. I jumped every time she rattled and then gradually she stopped rattling because she got used to me" (92). The gradual process of familiarity performed through daily interaction establishes trust between the snake and Silko. In a call for people to "safely live side by side with rattlesnakes in the Sonoran Desert" (113), Silko advises the reader: "Over time the rattlesnakes will get to know you and your pets. They learn human and dog behavior and seem to understand the timing of your daily routine; they try to avoid encounters with us at all cost" (114). While they ultimately attempt to avoid people, these intelligent creatures establish and practice trust. Indigenous practices of homemaking and being with emphasize "relationships that connect diverse parties (from humans

to forests) as *relatives* with reciprocal *responsibilities* to one another" (Whyte, "Indigenous Environmental" 564). The settler-colonial home, however, replaces the practices of multispecies trust, responsibility, and collaboration with a hierarchy of domination. This model of control centers the dominant male figure and leaves no room for more-than-human cohabitants that threaten colonial violence. Silko positions her practices of inhabiting as an explicit act of radical resurgence that resists settler-colonial logics. By living together, dismantling boundaries, supporting one another's well-being, and establishing relationships of trust, Silko and the rattlesnakes resist settler-colonial formulations of the home.

HISTORIES OF COMPANIONSHIP

As Silko disassembles contemporary fences, nets, walls, ideologies, and boundaries meant to eliminate rattlesnakes, she also acknowledges that these reptiles have long been a site of Indigenous radical resurgence. Rattlesnakes are deeply embedded within Native cultural practices in the Southwest. Silko explains that the Tarahumara Indians in Chihuahua, Mexico, use rattlesnake venom "to treat cancer tumors" and that snake oil possesses medicinal qualities for many Native peoples (82). She learns that "Hopi farmers copied the tight coil of the rattlers to make their garden plots. The farmers made deep circular depressions in the garden soil that were designed to catch and hold rainwater for the seeds planted in the center just the way the rattlers caught rain in their coils" (104). These examples demonstrate that rattlesnakes have long supported the well-being and survival of Indigenous peoples. Silko also discusses her long-standing familial and spiritual connections to rattlesnakes, recalling how her relatives "used to sprinkle corn meal and pollen in the circles the snakes made" (102). Not long after her mother's death, Silko comes across two blue rattlesnakes while on a horse ride that she recognizes as her mother's spirit: "The twin rattlesnakes caught my attention; they were her message to me. Where she was now was in this world and nearby me, but not as she was" (98). These creatures connect Silko to her loved ones, reaffirming Laguna Pueblo presence and continuance.

With their central position in many tribal cultures, rattlesnakes have been the direct target of settler-colonial eradication campaigns. Yet

Silko imagines that, despite being targeted for extermination, ancient rattlesnakes persist:

> At the time of the coming of the Europeans to the Americas, giant rattlesnakes in excess of ten feet in length with the diameter of a man's thigh lived near springs and permanent sources of water. The indigenous people believed the springs belonged to the big snakes, and they revered the snakes as divine messengers and bringers of rain. Reports by the Spanish troops and the Catholic priests recount their diligence in hacking up these giant snakes or burning them alive in the name of Christianity.
>
> But the Americas are vast. Great expanses of mountainous areas are virtually inaccessible even by helicopter. Many rural locations are only visited a few times a year by a handful of people. Rattlesnakes are wise beings, so it seems possible that in remote box canyons in mountains too steep and rough for humans to enter, a number of twelve foot long rattlesnakes have survived after all. (110)

This passage considers how rattlesnakes are the site of both settler-colonial violence and Native radical resurgence. Silko blames Spanish troops and Catholic priests for the "hacking" and "burning . . . alive" of giant rattlesnakes, making it clear that the eradication of these creatures was a way to exterminate Indigenous belief practices that asked people to revere the snakes as "divine messengers and bringers of rain" and replace this rich Native belief system with Christianity.[11] As Whyte argues, "Settler colonialism . . . interferes with and erases the socioecological contexts required for indigenous populations to experience the world as a place infused with responsibilities to humans, nonhumans and ecosystems" ("Indigenous Experience" 159). By destroying the rattlesnakes and their habitats, settler colonialists also sought to eliminate the socioecological conditions required to support Native life and customs. However, in direct opposition to the settler-colonial goal of total extermination, Silko claims a form of what Pellow calls "socioecological indispensability," arguing that giant rattlesnakes may have survived and asserting their central position within landscapes and Native practices. If the giant snakes have survived settler-colonial possession and displacement, Indigenous beliefs and practices concerning the snakes have also continued to exist. In this way, the collective continuance of rattlesnakes and Native peoples is a form of radical resurgence, a way

of refusing settler-colonial violence by enduring and asserting a shared indispensability.

RADICAL RESURGENCE THROUGH ART AND LANDSCAPE

Silko's multispecies radical resurgence culminates in the final section of the memoir, where she uses Indigenous art to resist the disruptive settler-colonial actions of a neighbor who possesses and destroys a local arroyo that provides necessary habitat and food sources for the creatures she lives alongside. Urban sprawl, Silko explains, is a particularly pernicious manifestation of contemporary settler colonialism. The outward expansion of Tucson has led to fragmentation and privatization of land, which has subsequently displaced desert beings. Repeating a critique that runs through her fiction, Silko addresses how real-estate development has produced the dangerous interworking of possession and displacement: "In the past thirty years the bulldozers and urban sprawl of Tucson have destroyed hundreds of square miles of pristine desert habitat and left the desert tortoises in danger of extinction along with the Gila monster lizards and spotted owls" (82). While her description of the desert habitat as "pristine" is troubling, given the environmental history of this region, Silko makes it clear that real-estate expansion has parceled up the Sonoran Desert and displaced a number of animals.[12] During a walk through the Tucson Mountains, Silko discovers that her neighbor—a proponent of Tucson's urban sprawl—recently quarried sand and stone from a nearby arroyo to improve his yard. Upon seeing the damage done to the arroyo, she remarks: "[T]he beautiful gray basalt and pale orange quartzite boulders had been torn loose from the sides of the arroyo and dragged out of the wash and skidded up the old road to 'landscape' the yard of the preposterous house with its prison tower and prison wall" (170). The neighbor possesses significant wealth and owns an oversized, sprawling home that overlooks the arroyo. Unlike Silko's home, which is rather compact, is part of the Sonoran Desert, and nurtures the well-being of more-than-human companions, the neighbor's house is "preposterous," reminds Silko of a "prison," and eradicates local creatures. By likening the house to a prison, Silko emphasizes how the building aims to be impermeable and how it threatens the well-being of nonwhite and nonhuman bodies.[13] Damaging the Sonoran landscape harms multispecies relations.

In a subsequent passage, Silko characterizes the destruction of the arroyo as a direct form of settler-colonial violence endorsed by the state: "The owner of the grotesque house could have easily afforded to buy rock and sand excavated legally from a quarry. Instead he acted out what he saw as his manifest destiny: to destroy whatever he wanted to destroy willy-nilly no matter the impact on others or himself" (170). Unconcerned about the well-being of other inhabitants and unable to recognize his own embeddedness in this landscape, the neighbor participates in a paramount settler-colonial imaginary of the US West: Manifest Destiny. The colonial belief in the rightful and inevitable ownership of western lands justified, and continues to justify, the elimination and erasure of Native peoples and more-than-human beings. Holding unbridled patriarchal entitlement and privilege, the neighbor believes the arroyo is his to pillage. However, as Silko observes, damaging this ecosystem puts others at risk, including the man responsible for these acts. Silko views the destruction of this place as a state-condoned attack against both her Native identity and the well-being of other desert inhabitants: "The loss and outrage I felt choked me. I knew the local authorities didn't bother to enforce the laws intended to protect the land from damage, and that angered me even more" (169). The state sanctions this settler-colonial violence that leaves Silko "choked" and unable to breathe or speak. As Lindsey Dillon and Julie Sze make clear, the state restricts the ability of people of color to breathe. Dillon and Sze point out that socioenvironmental justice movements, including Black Lives Matter, have used phrases such as Eric Garner's last words, "I can't breathe," to resist police and state brutality (247). By stifling Silko's breath in this moment, the state can be read as further limiting her ability to resist. Silko, however, writes about her experience, using the memoir genre to speak and breathe again.

In addition to stifling Silko's Indigenous identity, the state-sanctioned violence also harms her more-than-human companions. Before this man's harmful actions, the arroyo supported a vibrant multispecies community of desert tortoises, Gila monster lizards, and spotted owls; however, the destruction of this place forces a group of famished great horned owls to pursue several macaws that live with Silko. She blames her neighbor and the state for this attack: "I love the great horned owls; I don't blame the owls for the attack on my macaws, I blame the men in the bulldozers who crush the desert. I blame the imbeciles in

Pima County government who fail at everything except collecting taxes and bribes" (Silko 207). Aileen Moreton-Robinson considers this state-approved violence a possessive logic that works to "circulate sets of meanings about ownership of the nation, as part of commonsense knowledge, decision making, and socially produced conventions" (xii). By physically damaging the desert with heavy equipment and participating in bureaucratic practices, the settler state supports and justifies the possessive violence caused by Silko's neighbor.

After several failed attempts to secure justice through state authorities, Silko pursues a form of radical resurgence that operates outside of state power. She uses Laguna Pueblo art to ensure her continued presence and the future well-being of more-than-human creatures in the Sonoran Desert. Silko paints white Star Beings, or spirits sent from the stars, on the remaining stones in the bulldozed arroyo. "The Star Beings directed me to paint their glyph," she explains, "the white cross figure of the star, on all sides of the boulders, and especially on the scars left by the metal claw of the machine or cracks or damaged [*sic*] inflicted by the machine" (308). Feeling responsible to the boulders and the arroyo, Silko establishes moral relationships with environmental figures. Shortly after this radical act of resistance, Silko returns to the arroyo to discover that her neighbor ceased his destructive actions; the Star Beings stymied settler violence. As Silko leaves the arroyo, she encounters a local woman, who asks if she has seen the "gang graffiti" left on the boulders in the gully. This hiker suspects that gangs from Tucson visited the region to tag stones with their group's sign. In this moment of cultural misidentification, Silko's Laguna Pueblo art is falsely interpreted as gang sign. The woman's misreading of these marks demonstrates how gang behavior is criminalized while settler-colonial actions are not. As Silko remarks, "In Tucson 'gang' and 'gang graffiti' are code words white people use to indicate young brown or black men who they consider to be 'aliens' even if they are born in Arizona" (317). The settler state attempts to manage black and brown bodies while normalizing and condoning environmental violence.

In addition to rendering visible the normalization of settler-colonial harm, the misidentification of these marks demonstrates the extent to which Indigenous individuals have been erased from this landscape. Rather than consider local actors, the woman makes a significant leap to assume that "an urban gang had driven miles out of town to the

big arroyo to paint 'gang graffiti' on the rocks" (Silko 318). Moreover, she is unable to recognize the Star Beings as a Laguna Pueblo spiritual art form and instead assumes that these marks must be graffiti. Silko, however, refuses to be misinterpreted, affirming that her marks are a form of radical resurgence: "How interesting that the small white crosses were interpreted as 'gang graffiti.' . . . Apparently the emblem of the Star Beings penetrated the psyches of the newcomers who got the message: indigenous forces are present to oppose you" (317). The Star Beings, boulders, and herself, she makes clear, are "indigenous forces" that together "oppose" state-condoned colonial violence. Silko's art operates external to state control and represents an assertion of Native self-determination. Abandoning the regulatory apparatus of the state, which supports settler-colonial projects of possession and displacement, Silko refuses to participate within the state judiciary system.[14] As Elizabeth Hoover explains, Indigenous individuals must work within the trappings of the settler state if they seek environmental justice. "Indigenous people are free to construct and produce environmental knowledge according to whatever cultural criteria they wish," Hoover writes, "but if they want to see that knowledge actually used in negotiations, they must express it in a way that conforms to those criteria specifically sanctioned by state power" (132–33). Silko abandons this framework altogether, practicing radical resurgence to halt the neighbor's destructive actions. By painting Native symbols on the damaged boulders of the arroyo, Silko resists settler-colonial violence. This resurgent act allows Silko to assert her Laguna Pueblo presence and protect the landscape that nurtures more-than-human companions.

SELF, GENRE, AND RADICAL RESURGENCE

Supporting the well-being of Silko's fellow desert cohabitants preserves her Laguna Pueblo identity, ensures the ongoing contributions of more-than-human creatures to this landscape, and resists contemporary settler colonialism premised on the logics of possession and displacement. *The Turquoise Ledge* accomplishes this work by exploring the plurality of selfhood through personal narrative. Beard argues that in life narratives by Native women of the Americas, "the self is defined not in individual terms but in collective terms, as part of a collective struggle, as part of a communal identity" (*Acts* 115). Moreover, as Reder contends,

the self in Native memoirs is "ever-changing" and constantly in flux ("Stories" 278). Silko presents her Laguna Pueblo self as always mutable and mutual, but she practices this identity by positioning herself within a landscape of active more than humans that constantly shape and influence one another. By writing herself into the Sonoran Desert, in accordance with IESS understandings of relationality, Silko positions herself as just one creature among many who together resist settler colonialism in this place. Her identity as a Laguna Pueblo woman hinges upon the presence of rattlesnakes, owls, lizards, skunks, and a host of other creatures. Silko centers a collection of more-than-human characters, ultimately using the Native memoir form to reject the colonial belief in bounded subjectivity and the division between "human" and "other" in favor of an Indigenous perspective that acknowledges moral relationships and intimate interconnections. Read together, the entangled resistance of Silko and more than humans to disruptive and possessive settler-colonial logics is a form of radical resurgence that refuses the many manifestations of settler colonialism. Critiquing the multiple, pervasive forms of settler violence in the desert Southwest, Silko proposes decolonial modes of togetherness necessary for future well-being. With its emphasis on togetherness, relationality, and collective continuance, *The Turquoise Ledge* models a form of multispecies storytelling that affirms the presence of Indigenous peoples and more-than-human beings.

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NOTES

1. Influenced by Voyles's discussion of wastelanding in the US Southwest, Million contends that the region known as the Arctic represents the most recent manifestation of this settler-colonial move to vacate meanings, people, and more than humans from landscapes. Imagined as empty and devoid of cultural value, the difficult terrains of the arctic tundra and desert landscape justify resource extraction by global superpowers and multinational corporations.

2. I use David Abram's phenomenological term "more than human" to describe the creatures of the Sonoran Desert because it better captures Silko's inclusive relationship with organisms than the Cartesian and colonial term "nonhuman," which positions certain people—the European subject, in particular—as superior to all animal and plant others that can never be human.

3. While pigeons and macaws are not indigenous to the Sonoran Desert, they have occupied this place for centuries through a history of trade.

4. See Beard (*Acts*; "Teaching"); Sands; and Faagai for more on Native life writing as narrative resistance. Lee Schweninger argues that life writing has been central to Native literature because it enables authors to foreground injustice through personal experience and to emphasize differences between Indigenous and European American responses to land (11).

5. Reder further develops these claims in "Writing."

6. IESS resists non-Indigenous readings of the text that risk misrepresenting Silko's experiences, the Sonoran Desert, the threats of ongoing colonialism, and the beings that occupy this place. Like Annette Angela Portillo, who, in her recently published *Sovereign Stories and Blood Memories: Native American Women's Autobiography*, explains the necessity of centering indigeneity in Silko's memoir, this article reads *The Turquoise Ledge* through Native frameworks. As Portillo notes: "A nonindigenous-centered reading of *Turquoise Ledge* might characterize Silko as a 'nature writer' or even call her an 'environmental conservationist' using ecocriticism or even ecofeminism as a methodology to examine her text. But I resist those reductionist methods because at its core *Turquoise Ledge* is about survivance of indigenous peoples and indigenous homelands as well as animals and all sentient beings" (74). For more on the threats posed by non-Native methodologies, theories, and praxis, see Tuck and Yang; Todd.

7. See Whyte, "Our"; Norgaard; and Willette, Norgaard, and Reed.

8. Taking a different approach from Catherine Rainwater, who questions the "real" presence of the rattlesnakes, this article understands these creatures to be participants in the Sonoran Desert landscape. In one of the few scholarly publications that consider *The Turquoise Ledge*, Rainwater contends that "by telling us that she lives among rattlers and receives messages from Star Beings, Silko shakes her attentive audience loose from blinding certainty" (13). Rather than reinforce a binary between certainty and uncertainty, this article avoids claims to "the real" and reads the rattlesnakes as Silko's cohabitants.

9. LaDuke provides a similar discussion of Indigenous place, writing about Anishinaabeg connections to land and water: "We are nations of people with distinct

land areas, and our leadership and direction emerge from the land up. Our commitment and tenacity spring from our deep connection to the land. This relationship to land and water is continuously reaffirmed through prayer, deed, and our way of being—*minobimaatisiiwin*, the 'good life'" (4).

10. See, for example, Dunbar-Ortiz; Wolfe.

11. While rattlesnakes were hated, feared, and exterminated by settlers, the snake also became what Drake Stutesman calls "an emblem of colonial tenacity" during the Revolutionary War, when flags began displaying an image of a ready-to-attack rattlesnake with the words "Don't Tread on Me" underneath (176). Most recently, this image has been co-opted by the so-called Tea Party, which celebrates US colonialism and promotes continued settler-colonial violence.

12. At one point in her memoir, Silko describes the Sonoran Desert as "slightly askew and a bit trashy" (170). Her use of the term "pristine" to describe the Sonoran landscape obscures the environmental violence that has occurred in this place and suggests that the settler-colonial concept of "untouched wilderness" still holds cultural currency.

13. In *What Is Critical Environmental Justice?* (2017) Pellow explains that prisons, contrary to the goals of the state, are quite permeable. Inmates regularly escape, and toxins saturate most prison complexes. In addition, prisons displace more than humans through their construction and the practices required to maintain them.

14. The Native pursuit of justice external to the state judicial system also highlights the inadequacy of colonial courts to fairly handle disputes and demonstrates the wide array of Indigenous practices available for addressing and resolving criminal acts.

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